DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 318 750 TM 014 766

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TITLE The Three-Fingers Technique: Does It Reduce Test Anxiety?
PUB DATE 88
NOTE 5p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *College Students; Higher Education; Questionnaires; Relaxation Training; *Stress Management; *Student Attitudes; *Test Anxiety; Testing Problems
IDENTIFIERS Focusing Strategies; Silva Mind Control; *Three Fingers Technique

ABSTRACT

The utility of brief exposure to a mental focusing aid, the Three-Fingers Technique (TFT), in reducing test anxiety was studied for 15 college students. One week before their final examination, the students were given a 15-minute classroom introduction to the TFT, part of the Silva Mental Training Method (1983). After the introduction to this conditioned trigger that assists in improving mental focus and concentration, students participated in a 15-minute relaxation exercise and received instructions on using the method for studying and for taking tests. A Likert-type questionnaire was used to determine student attitudes about the technique and its use. Almost all of the students (80%) felt that the relaxation exercise was helpful. All of the students reported that they felt anxiety on previous tests. Of the 13 students who used the technique, during the exam, 8 felt less anxiety than on previous tests, 3 maintained the same level of anxiety as on previous tests, and 2 felt more anxious than on previous tests. In an evaluation of aspects of the course, students ranked the relaxation exercise third in usefulness, after the course textbook and course lectures. One bar graph is included. (SLD)

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THE THREE-FINGERS TECHNIQUE: DOES IT REDUCE TEST ANXIETY?

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The Three-Fingers Technique:
Does it Reduce Test Anxiety?

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The objective of this study was to determine if a brief exposure to a mental focusing aid, the Three-Fingers technique, helps reduce test anxiety. The hypothesis of the study was that training in the Three-Fingers technique will assist students in preparing for and taking exams as well as assist in reduction of feelings of test anxiety.

Theoretical Framework

Test anxiety is a troublesome condition found to be prevalent today among most students. Various studies have explored how test anxiety influences academic achievement and how it might be reduced. Hembree (1988) did a meta-analysis of the results of 562 studies and found that test anxiety correlated inversely to students' self-esteem and directly to their fears of negative evaluation, defensiveness, and other forms of anxiety. Zatz & Chassin (1985) found that test-anxious children showed more task-debilitating cognitions during testing, including more negative self-evaluations and off-task thoughts and fewer positive self-evaluations. Head (1984) found that high-test-anxious students were less positive about tests and viewed tests as more active and potent. Chang (1986) explored various treatment techniques and concluded that any type of treatment would seem to reduce self-reported emotional aspects of test anxiety. In a study by Dendata & Diener (1986) relaxation/cognitive therapy was found to be effective in reducing test anxiety but failed to improve classroom test scores. Danielson (1984) investigated the effects of relaxation and imagery training and found these helped students minimize the effects of stress and score higher on standardized tests. Knapp and Mierzwa (1984) found that a treatment program consisting of relaxation skill training, cognitive restructuring and systematic desensitization resulted in decreased levels of test anxiety. Dole (1983) performed a meta-analysis of 78 published studies from 1966 to 1979 on test anxiety reduction in college students and concluded that simple relaxation is as helpful as more complex and time consuming treatments.

Method

Procedure

The Three-Fingers Technique is a part of the Silva mental training method (Silva, 1983). It is a conditioned "trigger" that assists in improving mental focus and concentration and is suggested as an aid to improved studying and test taking. One week prior to taking their final exam, a group of 15 college students was given a very brief 15 minute introductory lecture about the Silva Method and the benefits of the Three-Fingers Technique. They then participated in a 15 minute relaxation exercise designed to promote functioning in a relaxed level of consciousness. Suggestions were given for mental relaxation, using beneficial affirmations and guided imagery. During the relaxation exercise students were given the Three-Fingers "trigger" Technique which included instructions that whenever they join the tips of the first and second finger against the thumb of either hand their mind will instantly adjust to a deeper level of awareness. Students were then given

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instructions on using the technique for studying and test taking. Stanton (1986) states that the technique makes use of relaxation, suggestion and imagery and is thus similar to many operational definitions of hypnosis.

The 15 minute exercise was an extremely brief exposure to the Silva Method and was much less than would normally be recommended. The purpose of this study was to find out what effect such a brief exposure would have on student attitudes. Stanton (1986),in a previous study, showed that high school students' grades could be improved with the Three-Fingers Technique. This current study was to determine if test anxiety, a problem all the students in the study admitted to having, could be reduced. After taking their final exam, the students were asked to complete a brief questionnaire.

Instrument

A Likert type questionnaire was used to determine student perceptions on how much they used the Three-Fingers Technique in preparing for the exam, how much they used the technique while taking the exam, the extent they felt the technique helped them, the extent of their anxiety during other previous exams, the extent of their anxiety during the current exam, and the extent to which they perceived the technique increased their grade on this exam.

Results

Most (80%) of the students felt the relaxation exercise itself was helpful. Almost all (93%) said they used the Three Fingers Technique in preparing for the exam. Most (87%) used the technique while taking the exam. Most (93%) stated that they felt the technique was definitely helpful to them. Only one student was unsure if it helped.

All the students reported they felt anxiety on previous exams. Of the thirteen students who used the technique during the exam, eight (62%) felt less anxiety than on previous exams. Three maintained the same anxiety level as on previous exams and two felt more anxious. Seven (54%) of the students felt sure their grades on the exam were higher due to using the technique. Another six of the students were unsure if the technique helped their score on the exam.

Discussion

Thirty minutes of class time was used to expose the students to the Three Fingers Technique. This was only one percent of the total 45 hours of course class time. Despite this extremely brief exposure, almost everyone felt the exercise was helpful and more than half of the students felt they obtained specific benefits in reducing test anxiety and improving test performance. In an evaluation of all class activities and factors related to the course, students ranked the relaxation exercise third in usefulness, after the course textbook and the course lectures.

Considering the very small amount of class time invested in the technique, the overall results seem worth investigating further. More than half the students stated they would have liked more time and exercises to practice the technique. Benefits to students should increase as they spend more time practicing the technique and this will be determined with further research.

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Figure 1. Questionnaire results